Indian Rock Park: Hoaxes, Tragedies, and Ghostly Encounters

By: Carla Welsh (née Seitz)

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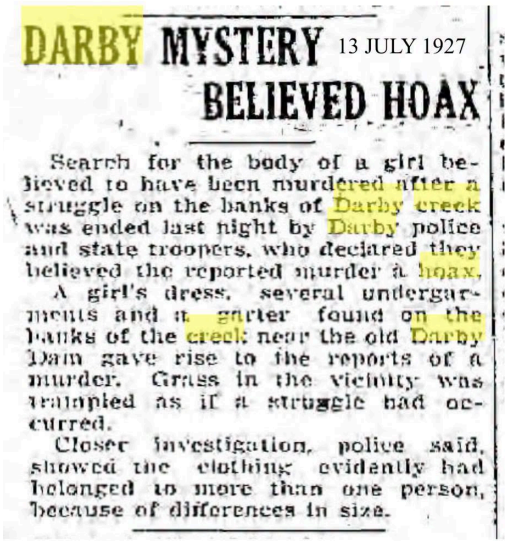
Indian Rock Park is located in Springfield Township, Delaware County, Pennsylvania. The park was named between 1955 and 1957 by James M. Davis, a former Springfield Township commissioner, chairman of the Springfield Park and Recreation Committee, and curator of the township museum. He selected the name from the prominent cliff known for many years as “Indian Rock,” a 150-foot outcrop overlooking a small spring along Darby Creek. The land for the park was conveyed to Springfield Township by the Brookhaven Corporation between 1954 and 1955. The park itself did not receive the name "Indian Rock Park" until after that transfer took place.

Per Chester Times article dated June 12, 1956, quoting James M. Davis:

“Indian Rock Park has acquired its name from the large precipitous rock formation located at the rear of what is now Indian Rock Drive. It was there that many Indian ceremonials took place. The valley was definitely Indian country as is evidenced by many remains of their handiwork and dwellings recently discovered there…"

Indian Rock Park has been the site of both hoaxes and real tragedies over the past 100 years.

In 1927, Police searched the banks of Darby Creek for the body of a murdered girl. After an investigation, the entire case turned out to be a hoax.



DARBY MYSTERY BELIEVED HOAX 13 JULY 1927

Search for the body of a girl believed to have been murdered after a struggle on the banks of Darby creek was ended last night by Darby police and state troopers, who declared they believed the reported murder a hoax.

A girl's dress, several undergarments and a garter found on the banks of the creek near the old Darby Dam gave rise to the reports of a murder. Grass in the vicinity was trampled as if a struggle had occurred.

Closer investigation, police said, showed the clothing evidently had belonged to more than one person, because of differences in size.

In 1958, James M. Davis spotted what appeared to be a body floating in the creek. Police responded, only to discover it was a fully clothed mannequin with its arms wired behind its back!

CHESTER (PA.) TIMES ★ THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18, 1958

JUST A MANIKIN 18 DEC 1958

Springfield Official Spots 'Body' in Creek

SPRINGFIELD—As usual this morning Springfield Commissioner James M. Davis took the 7:30 Red Arrow trolley out of Springfield and headed for his job at Girard Trust Corn Exchange Bank in Philadelphia.

As usual he glanced up from his paper just as the trolley rattled over the trestle crossing Darby Creek at Indian Rock Park.

As chairman of park and recreation in his township, Davis has a proprietory interest in this spot and habitually gives it a daily inspection.

A sweeping glance took in the frozen banks, the trees limned against a morning sky. . .and then he saw something that "almost made me fall out of the car window."

SEES NO MOTION

He looked with stunned horror as he made out what he was sure was the body of a small boy floating in the creek, snagged against a tangle of branches with its head half-submerged. As the car rocked on toward Upper Darby, Davis strained to detect motion in the floating form. He saw none.

He jumped off the trolley at 69th st., ran to a phone and called Springfield Police Chief Lester Forrester.

Forrester drove to the scene and waded into the freezing waters toward the motionless form. It appeared to be the body of a 4-year-old boy, dressed in Christmas colors with a red-buttoned, green snow suit, red cap, red earmuffs and red mittens.

Convinced he had a tragedy on his hands, Forrester had to turn the body over before he determined that the "drowned boy" was a fully-clothed manikin. As a bizarre touch the "dummy" had its arms wired behind its back.

Relieved, Forrester tucked the soggy manikin under his arms and trundled it to the police station. There he called Davis to tell him that happily it was a hoax.

Davis, still shaken, repeated his relief that "it wasn't the real thing . . . which would have cast a pall of sadness over Springfield during the Christmas season."

In August 2014, the park came under investigation once again. A prisoner claimed he had buried dismembered body parts in the woods near the park. Police took the claim seriously. The prisoner was brought to the scene in chains and pointed out the location where he said the bodies were buried. A cadaver dog was then brought in. Interestingly, the dog independently located the same general area and sat down to alert its handler. Officers began digging but quickly ran into a problem. If you've ever tried digging around Indian Rock Park, you know much of the ground is solid bedrock. It became obvious the prisoner could never have dug a grave there, so bulldozers were brought in to excavate the site. After an extensive search, nothing was found.

Photograph taken by the author in 2014. Note the police vehicle in the background. News vans and Upper Darby Police Superintendent Michael Chitwood were present, and local media interviewed Chitwood at the scene.

Indian Rock Park has also been the scene of genuine tragedies over the years. Several documented deaths have occurred there, dating back nearly a century. Among them were the discovery of a body by Boy Scouts while fishing and the body of a man described in newspaper accounts as a “hermit.”

Adding to its reputation is local folklore that tells of a young woman carrying a lantern who is said to walk the trails at night. There are also stories of an old headstone hidden in the weeds between the trolley tracks and the creek crossing near the large boulders. The author searched the area thoroughly nearly fifteen years ago but found no evidence of a headstone.

During the author's off-trail exploration of the park, several unusual features were discovered in a hidden clearing high in the woods. Whether they were created for artistic expression, personal ritual, or some other purpose is unknown, but they add another layer to the park's long history of local legends and unusual discoveries.

Area high in the woods, photographed by the author. This location is near the "Indian Rock" formation described by James M. Davis. The author has visited the rock formation, but dense vegetation prevented a clear photograph from being taken.

A weathered horseshoe nailed to a tree in Indian Rock Park. Horseshoes have long been associated with good luck and protection in folklore, but the purpose of this one is unknown. Whether its downward orientation was intentional, and what it may have symbolized, remains a matter of speculation.

Unusual tree carving and painted pentacle on trees within the park, photographed by the author. Pentacles have historically been used as protective symbols to ward off evil or misfortune. In modern Wiccan and Pagan traditions, the five points commonly represent earth, air, fire, water, and spirit, while the surrounding circle symbolizes unity or the interconnectedness of these elements. The age, origin, and purpose of the symbol found in the park are unknown.

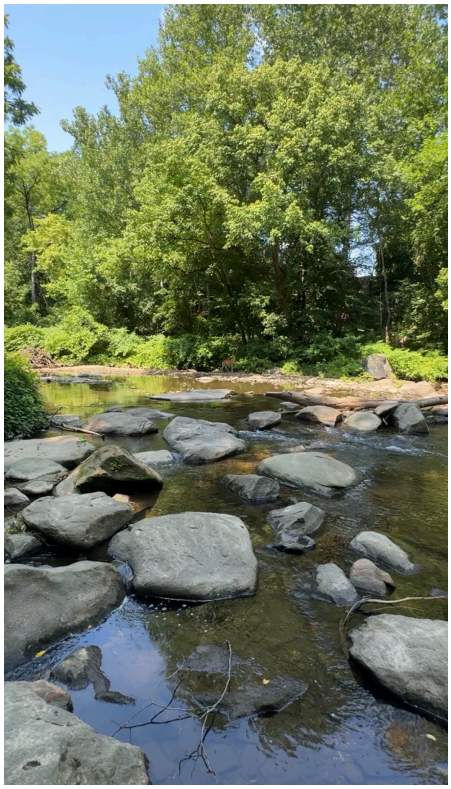
Photograph of the author by an unusual arrangement of deer bones. Also shown is a skull, possibly that of a raccoon, found during the author's off-trail exploration of Indian Rock Park.

What the author informally refers to as “Skull Tree.” Numerous animal skulls, possibly those of raccoons, were found at its base, while others adorned the tree itself.

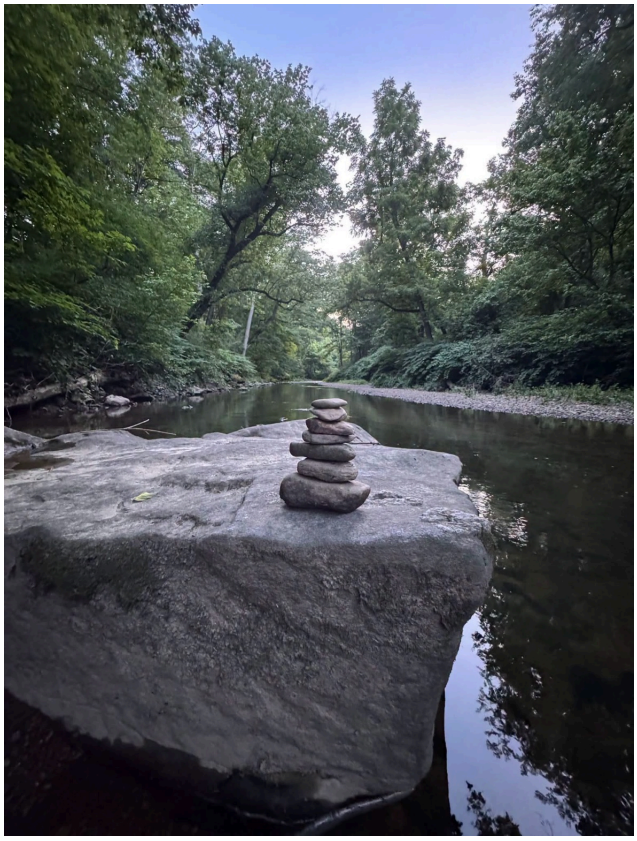
Photographs taken by the author in 2017 of the beaver dam that once existed along Darby Creek in Indian Rock Park, and a tree gnawed by the resident beaver. The beaver lived in this area for more than ten years before disappearing during the winter of 2017.

Photograph by the author showing localized transpiration in Indian Rock Park. During the fall, trees in one specific section of the park release large amounts of water vapor through their leaves. Under the right conditions, the trees will make their own rain.

View of Darby Creek and an ancient tree nearby resembling an upward-facing horseshoe, perhaps collecting fortunes from the universe. Its massive trunk would likely require three people with outstretched arms to encircle it.



Large boulders in Darby Creek, photographed by the author. Who’s feet have crossed these stones over the centuries?



A simple cairn of stacked stones on a boulder in Darby Creek, photographed by the author. The author often wonders how many generations of people have stood beside these waters, from the Lenape to early settlers and countless visitors who followed.

Arched-brick culvert remains of what appears to have been the tailrace near the dam ruins of the Fair Haven Factory/Emanuel Hey Brothers & Company/Wilde's Mill, discovered by the author in a section of the park that frequently floods. During periods of high water, the ruins are completely submerged and cannot be seen.

About the Author

Carla Welsh (née Seitz) is a genealogist, historian, and author specializing in the history of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New Sweden. Through archival research and field exploration, she works to separate folklore from documented history while preserving the stories of the region's past. She is the author of numerous historical articles and *The Push of Power: Reexamining the Pennsylvania Witchcraft Trial of Margaret Matson*. Welsh's ancestors arrived in the Delaware Valley in 1641, when the region was part of New Sweden, including Olof Stille and Hans Mansson. She has documented and proven this ancestry through the Swedish Colonial Society, where she holds Forefather status. She is also a Mayflower descendant and descends from numerous Revolutionary War patriots, as well as others who contributed to the war effort. Additionally, she is of multi-ethnic heritage, giving her a unique perspective on how laws have historically shaped society and influenced who prospers and who does not.